



Engaged couples fight divorce rates

By **Jacque Wilson**, CNN
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Couples should do a lot more talking between getting engaged and getting married, experts say.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Premarital educators get tough in preparing engaged couples for their lives together

Young couples more hesitant to get married because of divorce rates

Couples discuss uncomfortable subjects such as money, religion, children and sexuality

(CNN) -- "If it's your first marriage, you've got a 50-50 chance," Doyle Hamilton said, looking around the room. "If it's your second, you've got less than that."

A few couples shifted uncomfortably under his unwavering gaze. One woman kicked her fiancé under the table.

"The No. 1 indicator of divorce is not conflict," Hamilton continued. "The No. 1 indicator of divorce is the AVOIDANCE of conflict. Marriage is hard work. We want you to program that into your brains."

If it sounds like an intro speech at boot camp, there's a reason. Hamilton, a pastoral counselor and family therapist, was preparing these eight engaged couples for the rest of their lives together. And he wasn't about to soften the facts.

It really freaked me out that a lot of people in our age group weren't making it.

--Rachel Moreno

"All married couples have unsolvable differences. ... Change can happen. But you can't change him and he can't change you."

Hamilton spends one Saturday a month leading this nondenominational [premarital workshop](#) in a bare classroom at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, Georgia. Couples like Rachel Moreno and Joshua Williams spend the day exploring issues such as communication, relationship balance, family origins,

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expectations and life goals.

"We agreed upon getting engaged that premarital counseling would be a must so that we could get a head start on preventing potential major problems," Moreno said.

For Moreno and Williams, both 26, the workshop was a carefully planned step in their relationship. The University of Georgia graduates had been taking it slow since meeting in 2002, postponing their engagement for nearly eight years.

"It really freaked me out that a lot of people in our age group weren't making it," Moreno said. "Until I could get a better handle on it and be more secure in [the idea of marriage], I didn't even want to go down that route."

It's a common outlook for young couples, according to California psychotherapist Lisa Brookes Kift. She's seen a big increase in her premarital counseling practice, as well as sales of her [online premarital workbook](#), in recent years.

"For people in their mid-20s, even early-30s, there's been a dimmed view of marriage... they're seeing divorce everywhere and I think that might be a part of it."

Five premarital steps

- 1) Strengthen your communication skills
- 2) Increase the levels of emotional safety
- 3) Explore your relationship balance
- 4) Explore your marriage expectations
- 5) Develop your goals

Source: [LisaKiftTherapy.com](#)

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Participation in Hamilton's workshop has more than doubled since 2005 -- from 44 couples to 108 in 2009. Marriage prep education appears to be increasing nationwide, said Dr. Alan Hawkins, a professor of family life at Brigham Young University. While many couples in decades past have been required by clergy to attend, premarital counseling is becoming more popular among the nonreligious as well.

Some may wonder about the value of premarital education, Hawkins wrote in one of his research papers, but with changing gender roles, economic independence for women and no-fault divorce laws, "there is an increasing need for greater knowledge and relationship skills for contemporary marriages to succeed."

Six states -- Florida, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Georgia and Tennessee -- have passed legislation that encourages couples to attend premarital counseling by offering reductions on marriage license fees. These laws are likely to strengthen marriages and reduce the divorce rate in the states where they're implemented, Hawkins wrote.

Hamilton said relationship skill-building is a major movement in the marriage therapy field as well. The theory is that couples can learn to better relate and communicate their issues before it's too late, he said.

"We try to encourage them to talk about the things that really matter," Hamilton said. Most are uncomfortable subjects for couples to discuss, including money, religion, children and sexuality. Some couples come in unsure if their issues are insurmountable. Others are in denial and have so many unresolved issues that Hamilton questions their upcoming nuptials.

"If you don't deal with what you need to deal with, it will go underground and it will eventually raise its ugly head," he said.

Joshua Senneff has seen this firsthand. The married man of three

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years has several friends who didn't go through premarital counseling.

"It is interesting to see how 'little' things in their relationships have become 'big' things because they were not addressed prior to marriage," Senneff said.

Senneff and his wife, Kathryn Senneff, did private couples counseling on the recommendation of their family and church. They said they wanted to do everything they could to start their marriage on the right foot.

Until recently, the Senneffs used Joshua's parents as the foundation for their ideal relationship. But the elder couple's divorce last month shook Joshua Senneff's view on how a marriage should work.

"That will really cause you to question the sacredness of marriage," he said. "I feel that the tools we learned in our premarital counseling have significantly helped us through these trying times as our 'baseline' has disappeared."

Kift feels for couples in similar situations who, with the high divorce rate, no longer have strong role models to look to. Yet the therapist is hopeful that the happy couples she sees coming to her for premarital counseling will make it.

"Maybe there's a trend in reversing it -- let's do this so that we do survive, we want to survive," Kift said. "I think if more people did this work, I think they would be better able to weather the storms that come in."

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abcdef54321

Our fantasy of marriage as a relationship-paradise in which all our needs are taken care of and happiness is routine is just dumb. That is not what the marriages I have seen are like. Marriage is more like getting a job. No job is going to be perfect. Many jobs will drive you insane

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InTheKnow9

Yep. The real threat to marriage is homosexuals, right? Isn't that what all you Limbaugh-listening, Beck-loving, right-wing, tea-bagging, Nazi rage-pimps believe, right? Oh... and you just LOOOOOVE JESUS, don't you?? Anyhow.... let's just put all the homo's into concentration camps and then marr... [more](#)
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Guinness112

trashmonster... while I don't agree with the route that the OP went, marriage isn't solely a religious bond. It's a LEGAL bond. While it is mentioned in various religious writings, it is now more of a legal agreement than a religious/spiritual one. To consider it an actual religious affair, that ... [more](#)
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trashmonster

Oh, snap. Evidently you've got it all taken care of! Us Republicans are all Nazi rage-pimps. Here, let me try to stoop to your discourse level. Yep. The real threat to freedom is marriage right? Isn't that what all you Marx-reading, Obama-worshipping, leftist, Green Peace, Soviet Gulag artists believ... [more](#)
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moronbait

(and seriously, how do you really feel?)
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moronbait

Dearest God. Please protect me from your worshipers. Amen.
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DallasTony

If homosexuals want to get married who am I stand in their way of exercising their right to be miserable?
38 minutes ago | [Like \(3\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



DallasTony

Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half closed after.
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defiant

no no no. As we all know, homosexuality is the real threat to the sanctity of marriage. :/
58 minutes ago | [Like \(3\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



moronbait

oh. :-)
30 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)



defiant

.....I was making a joke...hence the sarcastic :/ face.

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moronbait

Who's talking about the "sanctity" of marriage? -- in fact the same relationship issues will affect gays as straights...

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moronbait

Personally, I think we have to stop looking at "love" as magic, and start teaching how to see "love" as a decision we make.

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DallasTony

Exactly! Too many people think love is the butterflies they feel in their stomach when they meet someone that excites them, then when the butterflies are gone, well, they must have fallen out of love. There are the feelings of infatuation, lust, awe, excitement, attraction, etc. that many people m... [more](#)

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californias

A long lasting marriage isn't necessarily a successful marriage. Divorce rates don't tell the whole story. Parts of the world where there is a low divorce rate are not necessarily places where people "live happily ever after". My family is from India and I know the only reason my parents stayed marr... [more](#)

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moronbait

so your point would be that we should all go for an unhappy marriage? :-)

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Bill802036

I truly believe marriages that stay together deal with their problems giving credence to addressing conflict and not avoid it. I also believe it is important to dig deep to be as sure as possible that you are truly in love and that your love will be stronger/more important than the typical issues o... [more](#)

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moronbait

The difficulty is that people see "love" as something we get lucky with instead of it being a decision - i.e. a commitment to love. I agree with the dig deep thing -- but the nature of the digging is to find within ourselves whether there are conditions or limits to our ability to commit.

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mymiracles

Marriage is not a piece of paper in my opinion. Although there is a piece of paper with my name and that of my Husband's on it, marriage involves much more than that. Marriage is loving your spouse as he/she is without trying to change them. Marriage is respecting each others opinions and feelings. Mar... [more](#)

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Guest

Marriage only works when both parties place their spouses needs above their own. Selflessness, humility, and

compassion are what makes it work. The "me" generation is too vain and self serving to stay married. The stigma of being divorced has made getting "out" too easy. Men get away with murder on ... [more](#)

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trashmonster

@MarysGoddess: Are you excusing the 50% divorce rate as all being caused by violence, cheating, etc? I highly doubt that many people would look down upon people divorcing because of those abusive factors. Most people (including myself) are more distressed by the vast majority of people who get divor... [more](#)

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MarysGoddess

Whatever. You DO realize that what you wrote is all BS? In times past, women specifically had no other options but to stay in a marriage. The husband could beat on her, drink himself silly, sleep around, WHATEVER, and the woman was too financially helpless to leave him, OR society would "look down... [more](#)

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moronbait

@dallas - good point, well said. But it doesn't have to be about clever. It can be learned and it can be taught. But most parents aren't good enough at it to teach it.

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DallasTony

If both parties always put the other spouses needs above their own, no one will ever get what they need. What good is that?

Sometimes you do need to put the other person first. Sometimes you need to take care of yourself so you have something to give the other person. It's a clever balancing act.

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moronbait

I don't completely buy this but I do buy that less self-centeredness is required. The traditional family thing is mostly myth (and I'm not arguing about the need for a loving mom and dad). Each American generation of parents has ably succeeded in not modelling good relationships or traditional famil... [more](#)

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